

Beluga bargain in works Natives might choose hunters

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Alaska Natives from different ethnic heritages may end up sharing the responsibility of deciding which villages or groups could harvest beluga whales in Cook Inlet.

A stipulation agreed to by most parties in a U.S. District Court hearing Wednesday could help heal a bitter rift between two groups of local Native hunters -- those from the Inlet's traditional Athabascan villages and those of Inupiat or Yup'ik heritage who now live in the region.

Under proposed regulations, beluga recovery in Cook Inlet would rely almost exclusively on restricting Native subsistence hunting to two whales per year over the next quarter of a century.

But who would decide which Native villages or hunters would get those strikes or kills?

That question has long haunted efforts to manage the local harvest and work out a recovery scheme for the depleted local whales. It has been a lightning rod for bad feelings and disputes between many local Athabascan tribal leaders and Natives, often with Inupiat heritage, who also hunted the whales.

"It's the issue behind the issue," Michael Payne, assistant regional administrator of protected resources for the National Marine Fisheries Service, said at one point.

After the allocation debate was repeatedly raised during statements and questions Wednesday, administrative law Judge Parlen McKenna proposed that the whole question be taken off the table. He asked that attorneys stipulate that it be decided later by local Alaska Natives as they hammer out harvest details with NMFS. Agreeing were attorneys for NMFS and Native groups and the Village of Tyonek, which has broad support among local Natives for a chance to harvest a whale.

The president of the Cook Inlet Marine Mammal Council -- the group that last summer allocated one strike to Tyonek -- said the stakes require all Natives to communicate and cooperate.

"Everybody's got to be involved," said Ninilchik village member Jon James. "If we have two strikes, we'll have to work it out."

Beluga hunter Joel Blatchford, an Inupiat who grew up in Anchorage hunting in Cook Inlet with his father, said he and other hunters not directly affiliated with local villages could work with the local council.

"The time has come where everybody has to sit down and work together," Blatchford said.

But even as the stipulation set the stage for future cooperation, several Natives speaking at the hearing expressed dismay at the regulatory process and past management by NMFS -- and openly disagreed that Native hunting was the prime cause of the decline.

Among them was Eklutna tribal CEO Lee Stephan, who read a statement attacking the proposed rules and accusing NMFS management biologists of triggering the beluga decline in the early 1990s. He said his village would recommend future hunts be restricted only to Tyonek, and said his village prohibits all hunting of belugas in Knik Arm except by Eklutna members.

James said that he and others blamed the departure of the belugas on noise levels and intense human activity in Cook Inlet waters. "They're nailing us -- the Native hunters -- when they should be looking at everything," he said. "It's everything -- it's not just one group."

Blatchford repeated earlier statements -- that he believes no hunting should take place until the population recovers.

Over the past decade, a population once thought to number up to 1,300 whales has crashed. The genetically isolated whales dropped to an estimated 347 in 1998 and 357 in 1999. Counts in the summer of 2000 appear to have found similar numbers, though a final population estimate probably won't be released until January.

During much of the hearing on Wednesday, Payne explained and defended how NMFS came to conclude that subsistence hunting was the prime cause of the decline. In a draft environmental impact statement on managing the whales, the agency had considered and rejected a wide range of other factors -- contaminants, noise, fishing, shipping, industry, sewer discharges from cities.

Until the beluga hunting was halted in 1998, the number of kills and strikes seemed to directly explain the observed drop in population.

"The strongest signal over the past six years has been the harvest," Payne said. "It's almost been a one-to-one thing."